

# 5 leadership lessons from women changing the narrative

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*Women make great leaders, but not just for the reasons we think. In addition to the collaboration and empathy they bring to the table, women know how to turn a slamming door into an opportunity to forge a new and better way.*



Photo by Brooke Lark on Unsplash

Women are immensely powerful. And not despite setbacks but often because of them. As women, we know what it's like to be the outsider, wild card and the only woman at the table. We know what it's like to work twice as hard for half the pay, to have our ideas pushed down, our deals pushed back and our male colleagues pushed ahead. We know this in and of ourselves and because we were brought up by women who fought for the right to vote, to own property, have agency over their own bodies and minds – to say that we are accustomed to fighting patriarchal systems and forging our own path is an understatement. But it still needs to be stated, time and time again because even now, we're still claiming too many 'firsts' in too many industries as we raise our daughters to demand equal pay as much as equal rights in business and under the law.

But we are women. We have reserves and resources like no other. And we also have other women to thank, look up to and lean on for support. That's why, to celebrate Women's Month, at icandi CQ we decided to stop and pay attention to the leadership lessons women have taught us.

## Lesson one: Women know empathy and kindness make for better leadership

The world's youngest female leader and everyone's favourite girl crush, [Jacinda Ardern](#), continues to prove that empathy and kindness are tools that strengthen governance, not weaken it. In July 2018, she announced welfare reforms that included a weekly stipend for new parents and an increase in paid parental leave from 18 to 22 weeks. Then, in 2019, soon after the deadly attack on two mosques in Christchurch, which claimed 50 lives, Ardern announced plans to tighten gun laws, while committing to financial assistance for those affected, including covering the cost of the victims' funerals. Whether she's taking her nine-month-old daughter to the UN General Assembly or using her platform to create a path for other women to follow, Ardern continues to prove that **real leadership is made stronger and better when it's embedded**

in genuine empathy, kindness and compassion.

## **Lesson two: Women unlock the door from the inside**

In 2018, General Motors was one of only two global businesses with no gender pay gap and was also ranked number one on the Global Report for Gender Equality. Sounds unusual for one of the world's biggest car manufacturers, right? Maybe not, considering that [Mary Barra](#) has been CEO of GM since 2014.

**A strong leader understands that when you're in a position of power, you need to unlock the door from the inside and hold the door open for more women to file in.** That's because they know that having more powerful women in the game will only strengthen their position, not weaken it.

## **Lesson three: Women create a healthier environment for all**

**Great leaders understand the concept of interdependence and value the equity that all people add to the bottom line.** When [Rosalind Brewer](#) stepped into the role as COO of Starbucks, she was the first woman and first African-American to assume that role. She set about making changes that would positively impact both her employees, customers and environment by helping the company implement policy changes, followed by racial bias training for employees in over 8,000 stores. Brewer then tackled Starbucks' sustainability initiatives, introducing a reusable version of the popular Starbucks holiday cup, among other things. And she's not the only powerful example.

In 2016, when [Isabelle Kocher](#) became CEO of Engie – the world's largest non-state-owned energy company, she used her power to create a three-year plan to shift the company's portfolio from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. By 2019, Engie had already divested 20% of its assets away from fossil fuel-related assets, ahead of Kocher's schedule.

**Rosalind and Isabelle teach us that effective leaders don't just stop at policy level. They get things done.**

## **Lesson four: Women are not afraid to break with conventional thinking**

The arenas of banking and stock exchanges are not only historically male dominated, they are known to be traditional and conservative. Deals still get done in ways that the old guard understand and prefer. Not so when women step up to the plate, as [Stacey Cunningham](#) proved when she became the president of the New York Stock Exchange in 2018 – the first female in its 226-year history. Cunningham immediately led the charge by updating the NYSE's trading operations with a major technology overhaul that will eventually connect all the stock exchange markets. She is also hard at work making it easier for companies to access public markets, at a time when more businesses are opting to stay private for longer.

The same could be said of [Ana Patricia Botín](#). In 2014, she became the executive chairperson of Santander – Spain's largest bank – after the sudden death of her father. But instead of continuing her father's work, she was quick to forge her own path. In the face of political unrest, Botín bucked with conservative thinking to focus on entrepreneurs, backing small enterprise and women-owned businesses, while championing fintech.

**It's clear that to lead change, inspiring leaders understand they need to create new rules and innovate.**  
**Lesson five: Women refuse to 'know their place'**

[Greta Thunberg](#) is not your average teenager. As a climate change activist [telling world leaders at the UN National Assembly](#): "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words", this 17-year-old has

led the world's largest climate change marches and sailed across the Atlantic to get her message across while staying true to her low carbon footprint.

In the same vein, [Serena Williams](#) is supposed to keep her winnings and earnings to the tennis court, not play the fields of business and philanthropy. Instead her company, [Serena Ventures](#), has invested in more than 30 startups over the past six years, 60% of which are companies founded by women and minorities. Women are not very good at being told what to do without any good reason for it. They invest their time, energy and money into projects or people that serve the greater good. And society is the better for it.

Like Geta and Serena, **purpose-led leaders understand their role is to drive business beyond profit, to make an impact within the communities they operate in.**

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